

The **Napoleonic Wars** (1803–1815) were a series of major conflicts pitting the [French Empire](#) and its allies, led by [Napoleon I](#), against a fluctuating array of [European powers formed into various coalitions](#). It produced a brief period of French domination over most of continental Europe. The wars stemmed from the unresolved disputes associated with the [French Revolution](#) and its [resultant conflict](#). The wars are often categorised into five conflicts, each termed after the coalition that fought Napoleon: the [Third Coalition](#) (1805), the [Fourth](#) (1806–07), the [Fifth](#) (1809), the [Sixth](#) (1813–14), and the [Seventh](#) (1815).

Napoleon, upon [ascending to First Consul of France](#) in 1799, had inherited [a republic in chaos](#); he subsequently created a state with stable finances, a strong bureaucracy, and a well-trained army. In 1805, [Austria](#) and [Russia](#) formed the Third Coalition and waged war against France. In response, Napoleon defeated the allied Russo-Austrian army at [Austerlitz](#) in December 1805, which is considered his greatest victory. At sea, the British severely defeated the joint Franco-Spanish navy in the [Battle of Trafalgar](#) on 21 October 1805. This victory secured British control of the seas and prevented the [invasion of Britain itself](#). Concerned about increasing French power, [Prussia](#) led the creation of the Fourth Coalition with Russia, [Saxony](#), and [Sweden](#), and the resumption of war in October 1806. Napoleon quickly defeated the Prussians at [Jena](#) and the Russians at [Friedland](#), bringing an [uneasy peace](#) to the continent. The peace failed, though, as war broke out in 1809, when the badly prepared Fifth Coalition, led by Austria, was quickly defeated at [Wagram](#).

Hoping to isolate and weaken Britain economically through his [Continental System](#), Napoleon launched an [invasion of Portugal](#), the only remaining British ally in continental Europe. After occupying Lisbon in November 1807, and with the bulk of French troops present in Spain, Napoleon seized the opportunity to turn against his former ally, depose the reigning [Spanish royal family](#) and declare his brother King of Spain in 1808 as [José I](#). The Spanish and Portuguese revolted with British support and expelled the French from Iberia in 1814 after [six years of fighting](#).

Concurrently, Russia, unwilling to bear the economic consequences of reduced trade, routinely violated the Continental System, prompting Napoleon to launch a [massive invasion of Russia](#) in 1812. The resulting campaign ended in disaster and the near destruction of Napoleon's [Grande Armée](#).

Encouraged by the defeat, Austria, Prussia, and Russia formed the Sixth Coalition and began a new campaign against France, decisively defeating Napoleon at [Leipzig](#) in October 1813 after several inconclusive engagements. The Allies then invaded France from the east, while the Peninsular War spilled over into southwestern France. Coalition troops captured Paris at the end of March 1814 and [forced Napoleon to abdicate](#) in April. He was exiled to the island of [Elba](#), and the [Bourbons were restored to power](#). But Napoleon escaped in February 1815, and reassumed control of France for around [one hundred days](#). After forming the Seventh Coalition, the Allies defeated him permanently at [Waterloo](#) in June 1815 and exiled him to [Saint Helena](#), where he died six years later.[30]

The [Congress of Vienna](#) redrew the borders of Europe and brought a period of relative peace. The wars had profound consequences on global history, including the spread of [nationalism](#) and [liberalism](#), the rise of Britain as the world's [foremost naval and economic power](#), the appearance of [independence movements](#) in Latin America and subsequent collapse of the [Spanish Empire](#) and [Portuguese Empire](#), the fundamental reorganisation of German and Italian territories into larger states, and the introduction of radically new methods of conducting warfare but also [civil law](#).

Napoleon [seized power](#) in 1799, creating a [military dictatorship](#).^[31] There are a number of opinions on the date to use as the formal beginning of the Napoleonic Wars; 18 May 1803 is often used, when Britain and France ended the only short period of peace between 1792 and 1814.^[32] The Napoleonic Wars began with the [War of the Third Coalition](#), which was the first of the [Coalition Wars](#) against the [First French Republic](#) after Napoleon's accession as leader of France.

Britain ended the [Treaty of Amiens](#) and declared war on France in May 1803. Among the reasons were Napoleon's changes to the international system in Western Europe, especially in Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands. Historian [Frederick Kagan](#) argues that Britain was irritated in particular by Napoleon's assertion of [control over Switzerland](#). Furthermore, Britons felt insulted when Napoleon stated that their country deserved no voice in European affairs, even though King George III was an [elector](#) of the [Holy Roman Empire](#). For its part, Russia decided that the intervention in Switzerland indicated that Napoleon was not looking toward a peaceful resolution of his differences with the other European powers.^[32]

The British hastily enforced a [naval blockade](#) of France to starve it of resources. Napoleon responded with [economic embargoes against Britain](#), and sought to eliminate Britain's Continental allies to break the coalitions arrayed against him. The so-called [Continental System](#) formed a [league of armed neutrality](#) to disrupt the blockade and enforce [free trade](#) with France. The British responded by [capturing the Danish fleet](#), breaking up the league, and later [secured dominance over the seas](#), allowing it to freely continue its strategy. Napoleon won the [War of the Third Coalition](#) at [Austerlitz](#), forcing the [Austrian Empire out of the war](#) and formally dissolving the Holy Roman Empire. Within months, [Prussia](#) declared war, triggering a [War of the Fourth Coalition](#). This war ended disastrously for Prussia, [defeated and occupied](#) within 19 days of the beginning of the campaign. Napoleon subsequently defeated Russia at [Friedland](#), creating powerful client states in Eastern Europe and ending the fourth coalition.

Concurrently, the refusal of [Portugal](#) to commit to the Continental System, and Spain's failure to maintain it, led to the [Peninsular War](#) and the outbreak of the [War of the Fifth Coalition](#). The French occupied Spain and formed a [Spanish client kingdom](#), ending the alliance between the two. Heavy British involvement in the Iberian Peninsula soon followed, while a [British effort to capture Antwerp](#) failed. Napoleon oversaw the situation in Iberia, [defeating the Spanish](#), and [expelling the British](#) from the Peninsula. Austria, keen to recover territory lost during the [War of the Third Coalition](#), invaded France's client states in Eastern Europe. Napoleon defeated the fifth coalition at [Wagram](#).

Anger at British naval actions led the United States to declare war on Britain in the [War of 1812](#), but it did not become an ally of France. Grievances over control of Poland, and Russia's withdrawal from the [Continental System](#), led to [Napoleon invading Russia](#) in June 1812. The invasion was an unmitigated disaster for Napoleon; [scorched earth](#) tactics, desertion, [French strategic failures](#) and the onset of the Russian winter [compelled Napoleon to retreat with massive losses](#). Napoleon suffered further setbacks; French power in the Iberian Peninsula was broken at [Battle of Vitoria](#) the following summer, and a new coalition began the [War of the Sixth Coalition](#).

The coalition defeated Napoleon at [Leipzig](#), precipitating his fall from power and eventual abdication on 6 April 1814. The victors exiled Napoleon to [Elba](#) and [restored the Bourbon monarchy](#). Napoleon

escaped from Elba in 1815, gathering enough support to overthrow the monarchy of [Louis XVIII](#), triggering a [seventh, and final, coalition against him](#). Napoleon was [decisively defeated at Waterloo](#), and he abdicated again on 22 June. On 15 July, he surrendered to the British at [Rochefort](#), and was permanently exiled to remote [Saint Helena](#). The [Treaty of Paris](#), signed on 20 November 1815, formally ended the war.

The [Bourbon monarchy was restored once more](#), and the victors began the [Congress of Vienna](#), to restore peace to the continent. As a direct result of the war, the [Kingdom of Prussia](#) rose to become a [great power](#) on the continent,[\[33\]](#) while Great Britain, with its unequalled [Royal Navy](#) and growing [Empire](#) became the world's dominant [superpower](#), beginning the [Pax Britannica](#).[\[34\]](#) The [Holy Roman Empire](#) was dissolved, and the philosophy of [nationalism](#), that emerged early in the war, greatly contributed to the later [unification of the German states, and those of the Italian peninsula](#). The [war in Iberia](#) greatly weakened Spanish power, and the Spanish Empire began to unravel; [Spain would lose nearly all of its American possessions by 1833](#). The Portuguese Empire shrank, with [Brazil declaring independence](#) in 1822.[\[35\]](#)

The wars revolutionised European warfare; the application of [mass conscription](#) and [total war](#) led to campaigns of unprecedented scale, as whole nations committed all their [economic and industrial resources](#) to a collective war effort.[\[36\]](#) Tactically, the French Army redefined the role of [artillery](#), while Napoleon emphasised mobility to offset numerical disadvantages,[\[37\]](#) and [aerial surveillance](#) was used for the first time in warfare.[\[38\]](#) The highly successful [Spanish guerrillas](#) demonstrated the capability of a people driven by fervent nationalism against an occupying force.[\[39\]](#) Due to the longevity of the wars, the extent of Napoleon's conquests, and the popularity of the ideals of the [French Revolution](#), the ideals had a deep impact on European social culture. Many subsequent revolutions, such as that of [Russia](#), looked to the French as their source of inspiration,[\[40\]\[41\]](#) while [its core founding tenets](#) greatly expanded the arena of [Human rights](#) and shaped modern political philosophies in use today.[\[42\]](#)